

## Promising Practices from Connecticut's FAFSA Challenge School Year 2020-2021

In January 2021, Connecticut launched its first ever FAFSA Challenge with 26 high schools representing 16 school districts. The goal of the Challenge was to strengthen postsecondary access and enrollment by raising FAFSA completion rates among high school seniors. Schools were challenged to raise their FAFSA completion rates among the Class of 2021 by at least 5 percentage points, compared to the Class of 2020. Schools participating in the FAFSA Challenge collectively increased their completion rates by 4 percentage points, while the state average held constant at 55 percent and the country's rate declined by over 4 percent relative to 2020.

The 2021-2022 Connecticut FAFSA Challenge is set to launch in Fall 2021 to continue the progress made in year one.

Challenge schools received seed grants, access to various resources, and were invited to participate in a FAFSA Learning Community. School staff and administrators engaged in informational sessions with financial aid experts and strategized activities to encourage students to complete the FAFSA.

In addition to continuing the FAFSA Challenge, Connecticut's commitment to postsecondary access for all students is codified in Public Act 21-199, which requires local and regional boards of education to adopt a policy by July 1, 2022 to improve FAFSA completion rates for their twelfth grade and adult education students.

This document highlights three schools and the strategies they utilized to increase their FAFSA completion rates.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Connecticut's FAFSA Challenge was based on the [National College Attainment Network](#) (NCAN)'s FAFSA Completion Challenge, which started in 2016 and challenged 22 states to raise FAFSA completion rates by at least 5%. Since then, momentum has built, and FAFSA challenge competitions have emerged [across the country](#). ASA Research evaluated the 2018-2019 NCAN national challenge, and their [report shares](#) the essential conditions and key practices necessary to increase FAFSA completion rates among students.

### O.H. Platt High School, Meriden Public Schools



**The Context:** Over the past decade, Platt High School has built their college and career readiness infrastructure. The school currently has a College and Career Coordinator who works closely with counseling staff to implement college and career readiness events and programming and actively partners with the [RISE Network](#). Students work with counselors in 11<sup>th</sup> grade to determine what type of postsecondary education or training they want to pursue after graduation, whether it be a 2- or 4-year college, an apprenticeship, the military, or the workforce. Counselors then follow up with 12<sup>th</sup> graders about their postsecondary plans during their senior year.

**The Opportunity:** While Platt had established a culture of postsecondary planning within their school, tracking FAFSA completion had not been a top priority. The school and district took the FAFSA Challenge

as an opportunity to tap into Meriden’s competitive nature and excite a multitude of stakeholders about getting students to complete the FAFSA. This included teachers, counselors, the principal, director of data and planning, and the superintendent. **From 2020 to 2021, O.H. Platt High School grew its FAFSA completion rate by more than 25 percentage points.**



**Establish a Task Force:** Given that filling out the FAFSA requires personal information, the staff at Platt knew they needed to elicit help from people within the high school community that students and families would trust. They decided to use the seed grant funding provided to each school at the start of the Challenge to develop a FAFSA Task Force. The school circulated the position internally and received more interest than the number of coaches they could hire. The Task Force included four coaches (three teachers and a school counselor), who dedicated 4-5 hours per week for 8-10 weeks outside of their typical contracted work hours, including after school and on weekends. The Task Force met together with the College and Career Coordinator and a senior counselor biweekly to discuss successes, challenges, and next steps. Additionally, senior leadership discussed progress at their weekly meetings.

ASA Research identified five essential conditions that successful sites cultivated in the 2018-2019 NCAN FAFSA Completion Challenge. One of the essential conditions was the **establishment of a core planning committee** specifically focused on FAFSA completion. These committees fostered cross-sector partnerships at the outset of the Challenge and enabled continuous communication throughout the year. Another essential condition was the **tracking and targeting of students** using student-level data. Successful sites identified students that needed support and tracked form completion.



**Track and Target Students & Meet One-on-One:** Each coach was assigned a caseload of 23 students. Coaches utilized the counseling department’s postsecondary tracking system and inserted a “FAFSA” tab, in which they documented the date each student completed the FAFSA (verified by the email confirmation the student received upon completion and submission of the form), how much time they spent with each student, and their FAFSA ID. Through their partnership with the RISE Network, each member of the Task Force received the [uAspire training](#) on the FAFSA.

Survey results from NCAN’s FAFSA Completion Challenge indicate that one-on-one assistance was reported as one of the most effective strategies employed by sites to increase FAFSA completion. Sites used data to target students that needed support and met with them to provide individualized counseling.

**Next Steps:** Platt intends to continue the Task Force next year.

## Synergy High School, East Hartford School District



**The Context:** Synergy High School is an alternative high school, which historically has not had many students pursue college following graduation. The school seeks to support students in a multitude of pathways and is working to expand the offerings to students to broaden their skillsets and ensure preparedness in both academic and nonacademic skills. **From 2020 to 2021, Synergy Alternative High School grew its FAFSA completion rate by more than 43 percentage points.**

**The Opportunity:** The FAFSA Challenge presented the opportunity for Synergy to reevaluate how they were preparing students for college and careers. School staff took the lead by connecting with Manchester Community College about expanding partnerships so non-traditional college candidates could have pathways to success. This included exploring more dual enrollment offerings between the two institutions and tracking to see how many students enrolled there following graduation.



**Incentives for Students:** Synergy used incentives like gift cards and t-shirts to get students excited about completing the FAFSA. Other popular incentives included FAFSA Fridays, where staff wore college and/or FAFSA shirts and cooked healthy foods thanks to their partnership with Fuel up to Play 60. This included steak on one Friday.

In 2018-2019, many cities and districts that participated in the NCAN FAFSA Challenge also used incentives like prizes and raffle drawings to encourage students. Two sites gifted graduation tassels to students who completed a FAFSA.



**Engage Postsecondary Partners:** Synergy intentionally contacted Manchester Community College (MCC) to consider additional ways to expand their partnership to benefit their students. Given that MCC was closed for most in-person learning during the Fall 2021 semester, they scheduled the college instructor to come to the high school.

Regular collaboration between both institutions will continue to find solutions where previously roadblocks existed.

**Next Steps:** Leaders at Synergy have many ideas for continuing the momentum of the FAFSA Challenge into future years. These include expanding the partnership with MCC, seeking partnerships with other organizations with financial aid expertise, and hosting an open house early in the school year to get conversations about FAFSA started. Additionally, Synergy aims to launch a focus group with secondary, postsecondary, and workforce stakeholders to strategize about how to better support students. This includes inviting visitors to participate in a Speaker Series at Synergy and developing credentials for Synergy students that colleges and employers recognize. Synergy serves as an example of how alternative schools can participate in college readiness efforts; if this kind of success can happen here there is no reason other schools cannot replicate these successes.

## P-TECH Norwalk, Norwalk Public Schools



**The Context:** Conversations about college and careers are embedded in the educational model at P-TECH High School in Norwalk, as many students are eligible for and earn a no-cost associate degree while they are in high school. Conversations about the cost of college begin in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and students who plan to take college classes must complete the FAFSA the summer following their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. **From 2020 to 2021, P-TECH High School grew its FAFSA completion rate by 32 percentage points.**

**The Opportunity:** For P-TECH, the FAFSA Challenge statewide campaign, outreach, and exposure led local partners in the area to reach out to the school about how they could help support students and families in completing the FAFSA. One local organization provided a virtual presentation to families of seniors and made themselves available for one-on-one consultations as well, free of charge. Staff at P-TECH also took advantage of the seed funding and professional learning community to further bolster their existing college access efforts.



**Meet One-on-One:** Meeting one-on-one with families and students is a part of the school culture at P-TECH. The principal meets with students and families individually when they enter the high school, and school counselors meet with students one-on-one as well. Counselors focus not only on the academic interests of students, but also discuss financial aid packages, and continue conversations throughout their high school journey. The FAFSA

Challenge enabled P-TECH to partner with organizations in the community, who met one-on-one with families as well.



**Data Tracking:** In addition to using EdSight to track student progress, the senior counselor also created their own tracking system of students who self-reported or shared their Student Aid Report with school staff.



**Professional Development for Staff:** P-TECH also used their seed funding for professional development for their senior counselor. They were able to get trained and attend financial aid workshops to better inform themselves of the FAFSA and how to support students.

Another essential condition that ASA Research identified among successful sites in the 2018-2019 NCAN FAFSA Completion Challenge was having trained FAFSA experts. Successful sites partnered with organizations with financial aid expertise to ensure their school counselors felt prepared to support students.

**Next Steps:** Leaders at P-TECH plan to continue to embed FAFSA work into various aspects of their school operations, such as their financial literacy and workplace learning courses and counselor one-on-one meetings with students. They also plan to start informing students of the FAFSA earlier in the school year.